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Testimony Reveals Differing Views of Curbs on Contra Aid

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WASHINGTON, May 7 — Testimony in the Iran-contra hearings this week shows that Administration officials held sharply differing views about what the laws restricting aid to the contras permitted them to do.

Some officials, including the United States Ambassadors in El Salvador and Costa Rica, apparently thought they could become directly involved in the covert program to supply the contras. The Ambassador in Honduras, meanwhile, has told investigators he was leery of such involvement.

The question of what the contra aid statutes permitted and how various Government officials treated the restrictions, known as the Boland Amendment, is emerging as a focus of both the Congressional hearings and the investigation by Lawrence E. Walsh, the special prosecutor.

Mr. Walsh has said in court that he may charge high Government officials with a conspiracy to violate Federal laws, apparently including the contra aid restrictions.

Testimony by Secord

In his Congressional testimony, Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord said some Central Intelligence Agency officers supported his contra airlift operation. But General Secord, a retired Air Force officer, said he complained last year to the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, that other C.I.A. officers seemed more interested in investigating what he was doing.

The C.I.A.'s attitude wavered, General Secord said, and in May 1986 there was "a considerable drawing back away from dealing with us at all in the airlift matter." But he said that period "passed fairly rapidly."

Documents released this week show that the chief American military adviser in El Salvador, Col. James Steele, knew of the private efforts but worried whether he was overstepping what members of Congress acknowledge was an ambiguously drawn line. Meanwhile, other military officers in the region were helpful.

The United States Ambassadors in El Salvador and Costa Rica, Edwin G. Corr and Lewis A. Tambs, aided the program, according to an interview with Mr. Tambs and General Secord's testimony. But the Ambassador to Honduras, John Ferch, has told Government investigators and others that he was "skeptical" when Elliott Abrams, an Assistant Secretary of State, asked him if he would run the contra program from Honduras late in 1985.

Mr. Ferch, who was apparently concerned about the legality, said he told Mr. Abrams he would help only if Washington sent orders on the matter in writing. A few months later, in the spring of 1986, he was relieved of his post. It is not clear whether the two events were related.

As for Mr. Corr, a message by General Secord said an associate, Rafael Quintana, had "fully briefed Ambassador on our ops" and "says Ambassador very supportive."

The various Congressional restrictions on contra aid are collectively named for Representative Edward P. Boland, the Massachusetts Democrat who introduced the legislation.

In testimony Wednesday, General Secord accused the press of failing to understand the Boland Amendment.

"I was quite certain and satisfied we were operating legally," he said.

Financing Cut Off in 1984

Legislators imposed a \$24 million ceiling on spending for the rebels in 1983, and in October 1984 they cut off all official American financing for them.

The 1984 restrictions were spelled out in two amendments. One was attached to the spending bill for the Defense Department and covered the department, the C.I.A. and "any other

agency involved in intelligence activities." A narrower provision was attached to the intelligence bill.

The Defense Department amendment barred Government spending that "would have the effect of supporting, directly or indirectly, military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by any nation, group, organization, movement or individual."

General Secord's opinion, he said today, was that officials' salaries were not included.

According to associates, Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North, the National Security Council official who was dismissed after the Iran-contra affair became known, believed the law did not restrict his activities because the N.S.C. was not an intelligence agency, as mentioned in the Boland Amendment. Some members of Congress disagree, noting that the Executive Order on intelligence describes the N.S.C. as guiding and reviewing foreign intelligence and counterintelligence.

In his testimony Wednesday, General Secord insisted that his was a private operation, wholly divorced from any Government control or direction.

The laws were loosened in 1985, when Congress allowed the Administration to spend money for communications and "advice" to the contras.